Measuring the return on investment for big-ticket purchases has been and always will be important to efficient organizations, but in the wake of the recession, hunkered-down companies have become that much more insistent that dollars be wisely spent. While skills-based training benefits can be tracked and measured, quantifying the return on big-picture, strategic learning is as challenging as ever. Executive education is about learning new tools, frameworks, ways to think about the business and the global economy. That’s not something you can test at the end of a chapter.

Even if one suspects that a program may have helped ready a senior executive for the next big task, it’s nearly impossible to trace a direct line. When CEOs look at ROI of executive education, it is probably best to use the analogy of the strategic radar screen. Every CEO has a list of big, strategic issues and challenges he or she would like to tackle in the next three, six or eighteen months. When the CEO sends someone for training, he or she is looking for the school to help ready that person to address a particular issue on the radar screen. So the question is, three months later, six months later, is it clear that the employee was prepared to deal with that issue or not?

Increasingly, companies that send executives to open-enrollment programs are sending them with very specific goals, challenges they are expected to solve while they’re away. In the past it was: “Broaden their perspectives, give them new knowledge, best practices, tools to use in the field.” Now it’s much more: “Do all that, but also get something done while you’re here that’s going to impact our P&L or our bottom line this fiscal year.”

Executives arrive at education programs with several significant business challenges their companies need to address. When they leave, they are expected to bring back keen insights, new thought leadership and, most importantly, solutions to those problems. For open enrollment, the more focused the company’s objectives for the executive, the easier it is to measure results. In custom corporate programs, metrics for evaluating return can be embedded upfront.

One area in which companies have had a relatively easy time justifying education spend is in succession planning, whether it’s preparing a candidate for the CEO office or readying a middle manager for a C-suite role.

Regardless of what industry a company is in, however, when an employee returns to an organization after being sent to learn a set of skills, the company benefits from that employee’s enhanced knowledge as well as the morale boost and gratitude an employee has after participating in such as course.

Sarah Clark is a freelance writer.
How Teaching and Learning Should Evolve by 2025

The Executive MBA Council (EMBAC) recently announced the publication of its A New Way of Learning and Working report. The research addresses how business education needs to evolve to keep pace with changing demands and expectations about professional development from both students and their employers over the next five years and beyond.

The study, conducted on behalf of EMBAC by higher education consultancy Carrington Crisp, draws on new original qualitative research from in-depth interviews with relevant decision makers at international business schools and within major employers who invest in working professional development. It also involved a survey of over 300 individual learners who were looking to take business school courses in the next five years.

“The relationship between employees and employers has been evolving for some time, and this study opens up what that means for the future of working professional education. Economic uncertainty, online learning, life-long development, remote working, and digital transformation in business schools and other organizations are not new. However, the global pandemic is accelerating these trends. Our sector will benefit from a purposeful and honest debate about how future ways of learning and work can help leaders in business and business education find new answers to the problems of our time,” said Michael Desiderio, executive director of EMBAC.

Key findings from the report, include:
- Less than four in ten (38%) of individual learners said they rated blended learning (face to face and online) as their ideal skills development path for the next five years.
- When choosing a business school, the top requirements are flexibility in how learning is delivered (45%), how much the school embraces digital transformation (42%) and how much the program will accelerate career prospects (35%).
- More than three quarters of employer respondents believe that business schools need to develop short, inexpensive programs that deliver relevant skills for those working and be clear about how their offer positively impacts wider society, not just the business industry.
- While employers agree that leadership remains an important skill for development, new leadership models are emerging that have stronger roots in “soft skills” such as emotional intelligence, more agility and conscious, continuous learning or project-based learning. Synchrony remains an important skill for development, industry.
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For more details, a full copy of the report can be found at embac.org.

Just How Large is the Ed-Tech Market?

The US K-12 sector spent $35.8 billion in 2020 on all things EdTech, including hardware, major software systems, digital curriculum resources and networks, a healthy increase of $7.5 billion over 2019. This spike was largely due to the CARES Act and essential capital spending on EdTech to enable remote learning, especially in institutions that had to scramble to issue computing devices, software and urgent training for teachers and students. One computer manufacturer privy to the edtech market analyzed a survey of 18 million machines into U.S. schools in under three months. Many schools and districts in the survey cited difficulties getting orders filled due to the surge in demand.

Hardware sales, inclusive of most networking products, stood at $16.6 billion, up by $4.5 billion over 2019. Major software systems sales were $6.1 billion, up by $900 million over 2019.

Digital curriculum spend in 2020 was $13.1 billion, an increase of $2.1 billion over 2019. Paper resources spend dropped by $1 billion to $6.9 billion in 2020 (This spend does not include staff). Digital curriculum spend includes digital textbooks, educational Apps, curriculum subscription sites, digital lesson plans, online video subscriptions, online news or library subscriptions, elearning curriculum also known as adaptive digital curriculum, courseware, digital testing or assessment products and services, and any other digital learning content materials except major systems.

In 2020, the average district spent $4.4 million on digital curriculum resources, with a $154.69 spend per student. Additional expenditure from school budgets is equivalent to $210,000 per school and $87.50 per student.

Schools in the survey listed many of their digital learning resources, which commonly cost between $2 - $7 per student per year. The Learning Counsel survey also reviewed the straight-to-consumer digital curriculum spending arena, which is estimated at $22.8 billion, easily $9.7 billion greater than all schools and districts spending combined. LeLani Cauthen, CEO of the Learning Counsel noted, “Parents went on a shopping spree for digital learning during quarantine, increasing spend on the consumer-side of learning resources by over $1 billion in under six months. Prior to the pandemic, consumer growth had slowed, but is now roaring ahead again at 25 percent, year over year.”

Other metrics from the survey – out of 32,827 school and district participating respondents:
- 7 percent of schools and districts now issue individual students a personal computing device
- 58 percent expect purchase of devices to increase
- 25 percent expect purchase of devices to remain the same
- 75 percent expect purchase of digital curriculum to increase, up from 70% in 2019
- 13.46 percent cite achieving a 100 percent full coverage model of core curriculum (main subjects of math, language, science, social studies/history) with digital resources
- 33.5 percent are considering purchase of eSpots related equipment and software
- 11 percent are considering social emotional software systems
- 33 percent are considering live tutoring systems
- 39 percent cite that 80-100 percent of teachers now use digital curriculum
- 23 percent cite that 60-80 percent of teachers now use digital curriculum
- 18 percent cite that 40-60 percent of teachers now use digital curriculum
- The largest portion of respondents, 39.3 percent, cited that they have a ratio of 50 percent free versus 50 percent paid digital learning resources
- The largest portion of respondents, 34.55 percent, cited that the use of digital curriculum and content comprises 50-75 percent of the school day
- From 2019 to 2020, the percentage of teachers spending 4-10 hours a week just searching around for digital lesson plan materials increased from 32 percent to 45 percent.
- While zero percent of respondents answered that teachers were spending above 10 hours a week just searching around for digital lesson plan materials in 2019, in 2020 it was 7 percent of teachers.
- From 2019 to 2020, the percentage of teachers spending 4-10 hours a week building their own digital learning content increased from 22 percent to 47 percent.
- The type of professional development offered for teachers was tied at 86 percent of respondents citing these two types: 11 device training and 21 digital communications (Google, Microsoft, other communications & video conferencing apps.)
- Third at 84 percent was training on teaching practice and academic standards.
- An obvious weakness during the pandemic was the fact that most schools still rely on learning as 62 percent or more whole-group oriented rather than personalized workflow learning, core academics screen learning, small group learning, supplemental screen learning or project-based learning. Synchrony remains an important skill for development, industry.
- While employers agree that leadership remains an important skill for development, new leadership models are emerging that have stronger roots in “soft skills” such as emotional intelligence, more agility and conscious, continuous learning or project-based learning.
- More than three quarters of employer respondents believe that business schools need to develop short, inexpensive programs that deliver relevant skills for those working and be clear about how their offer positively impacts wider society, not just the business industry.
- While employers agree that leadership remains an important skill for development, new leadership models are emerging that have stronger roots in “soft skills” such as emotional intelligence, more agility and conscious, continuous learning or project-based learning.

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Dancing with Machines: Preparing Students for the Workforce of the Future

By CHANDRA SUBRAMANIAM, PH.D. and ROBERT J. SHERIDAN

A few years ago, a cohort of undergraduate students returned from two weeks of classroom study, company visits and cultural immersion in China. One student reported her biggest surprise:

“When we visited the factory, I expected the automation and the robots. What I didn’t anticipate was the complex ways that humans would be interacting with them. It was like watching a carefully choreographed dance between the machines and the people, being performed all over this massive factory.”

That insight offers an apt metaphor for the challenges we face at the David Nazarian College of Business and Economics at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in preparing our students for the workplace of the future. We must teach them how to dance – with technological partners “trained” by artificial intelligence, to music written in the “key of data,” played on new-age instruments such as machine learning and the Internet of Things (IoT), orchestrated through robotic process automation (RPA), to accompany intimate ballets for every corporate purpose, both strategic and tactical.

That student who was surprised by factory choreography in Guangzhou would be startled at what RPA is doing to transform the very nature of back-office and customer-facing operations.

RPA provides systems with the authority to perform discretionary decision-making in an operational process. Within defined parameters, RPA empowers machines to “decide and execute,” at a specific point in time, without any direct human agency. Effecting such authority requires troves of data, powerful and precise analytics, and indeed – the rich experience of human talent to define the decision-making task and to build the solution.

RPA has advanced to the point where operational decision making can be automated for almost any repetitive process for which historical data is available, including those thought to be the sole province of human judgement. Big and emerging companies alike have developed products with expansive capabilities for a broad array of business applications. These platforms have become extraordinarily sophisticated over the past five years – not the least for the increasing ease of use.

Frontline employees use built-in tools for “task mining” – testing the data sufficiency, viability and the ROI of specific automation opportunities. These same employees can “record” the task, design a path toward the decision point, and test it – all with point-and-click pull-down menus.

RPA platforms can automate with internal applications as basic as Microsoft Office Suite, or as complex as legacy networks of cloud-based tools with API interoperability. Some of the more sophisticated platforms are now integrating smart contracts, enabled by blockchain.

For those frontline workers, the dance has become less routine. They’ve changed partners from application-based systems to task-driven ones. Large companies have distributed these tools widely and encouraged experimentation. The service divisions of the giant accounting firms and consultants of every size have made RPA a mainstay of their practices – internally as well as for client engagement.

The extent to which work has been augmented, rather than displaced, is illustrated by one RPA vendor’s pitch to prospective clients, a “personal assistant bot for every employee.” These would display dashboards, track metrics, log performance, and send alerts, triggers and queuing status so that the frontline workers can monitor the automated, low-error decision making in progress.

It’s a beautiful thing – except when it isn’t. It’s never fun to watch a dancer collapse on stage in full view of an audience, and the recent debacle of Zillow’s “flipping” business is ample testament to what happens when the dance of algorithms and human talent goes unrehearsed and out of sync.

And that’s where the Nazarian College at CSUN comes into play.

For years ago, as the realities of digital transformation and its implications for the workforce of the future became apparent, we decided upon a very specific and focused strategy – “Data First.”

We’ve reflected that by introducing two new degree programs, both a BS and an MS in Business Analytics. We situated these new programs within our Department of Systems and Operations Management, and moved all of our Information Systems faculty and programs into this same alignment. We beefed up our engagement in the SAP Alliance, incorporating the firm’s outstanding content into specific courses so that our students earn academic credit and validate professional credentials simultaneously.

At the same time we’ve reinvigorated our commitment to learning and career preparation objectives that emphasize critical thinking, teamwork, effective communication and ethical frameworks. We’ve invested heavily in classroom technology and faculty development to deliver hybrid excellence, while still insisting on the centrality of in-person pedagogy and engagement as the best approach for preparing human depth in a technological world.

We’ve also deployed some powerful RPA of our own. In fact, the website for our Career Education and Professional Development Center is powered by a dynamic engine that curates and targets opportunities and resources to our students based on major, career interest, developmental objective, and personal preferences. In effect, it’s a mass personalization bot.

It is extraordinarily gratifying to see our students graduate ready to dance on day-one of their careers, and to know that employers are inviting them to the party. Chandra Subramaniam is the dean of the David Nazarian College of Business and Economics at CSUN. Bob Sheridan serves as executive director of its Center for Career Education and Professional Development. Learn more at csun.edu/cbusecon.